

# EPA to Expedite Cleanup of Many Superfund Sites

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WESTMINSTER—Facing widespread criticism that the Superfund is a super flop, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is mounting an experimental project designed to overhaul the program and expedite cleanups of the nation's worst toxic-waste sites.

Included in the pilot program are a residential neighborhood in Westminster, where hazardous waste has been seeping into the back yards of tract homes, and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena. Both sites were added to the nation's Superfund list last week.

The attempt at streamlining, called the Superfund Accelerated Cleanup Model, is the federal agency's effort to fix its lumbering 12-year-old program, which has been ridiculed for creating an enormous backlog of sites waiting to be cleaned up.

The experiment aims to put many of the nation's Superfund dumps on a fast track, meaning EPA officials will attempt to complete cleanup in three to five years, compared to the 12 years it takes for an average site. From old mines and electronics plants to military landfills, California has 97 sites on the national priority list, including some that have languished there for a decade. Twenty-five sites are in Southern California.

"The whole goal is to physically get out there and clean it up faster," said David Jones, manager of the EPA's regional Superfund remedial action branch in San Francisco. "The idea is if you can skip a step, skip it. If you can get there faster, do it."

Time and money will be saved by condensing the EPA's long, rigid series of steps leading to cleanup, and eliminating

the repetition that is a notorious part of the process, agency officials say.

One crucial change: Instead of waiting for the full results of extensive studies before embarking on a cleanup plan, regional teams could initiate some remedies early, such as quickly excavating the most dangerous wastes.

Environmentalists, business people, attorneys, community activists—even the EPA—have lambasted the nation's multibillion-dollar Superfund as a bureaucratic boondoggle. The Superfund list has grown to 1,208 sites across the nation, while cleanup or containment has been completed on just technique or removed a spoonful of waste.

Industry representatives, who

have long complained that the bureaucracy slows cleanups and increases their costs, say they are encouraged by the EPA's attempt at streamlining.

"This is really a dramatic transformation if the concept is implemented," said Sue Briggum, director of government affairs at Waste Management Inc., the nation's largest waste hauling and environmental services firm, which is involved in over 100 Superfund cleanups.

"It has enormous promise because after over a decade of reflection, the agency has looked over the program and found deficiencies and procedures that wind up with a lot of paperwork and very little environmental benefit."

The agency has been developing the program, dubbed "Sack-em" because of its acronym, since February, when it was approved by agency head William K. Reilly. The streamlined techniques are being used at 13 sites, and newly listed and proposed Superfund sites are being wrapped in.

Now, the handling of each Superfund site is broken into steps, each coordinated by a separate team. The process of listing a site can take a couple years. Then, each step—such as preliminary investigation, formation of a plan, research of cleanup options—can take years. In the past, the EPA has waited for results of one step before moving on to the next one.

At the McColl dump, EPA officials spent three years studying the waste before choosing the option of hauling it to a Kern County landfill. But then they were sued, and new laws forced them to find a more permanent solution, which took EPA another four years. Then, that option ran into technical problems—so they had to start all over again. Only this year has EPA proposed a final remedy—but it will be at least three more years before they start on it.

The agency's staff has always been reluctant to advance a step, or merge steps, even when they believed it would be logical and safe. Now, the EPA has created "regional decision teams" to break the logjam and move forward.

The faster decisions and condensed studies are not likely to pose danger to the public, Jones said.

"There is a risk that if you do something a little quicker, you could miss something," he added. "But we know a lot more about the technologies now, and if you were

149, or 12%, since the program was signed into law by President Jimmy Carter in January, 1980.

The EPA expects the accelerated program to be not just an experiment, but an overhaul of the Superfund program that will take hold at all sites by 1994, according to a representative of the EPA's Office of Emergency and Remedial Response.

Lois Gibbs, a former Love Canal homemaker-turned-activist who helps people combat hazardous waste dumps near their homes, said she is skeptical that the EPA will turn the behemoth around.

"It's just another piece of rhetoric out of the agency to make people feel good. I can't believe they will start moving more quickly when they've moved so slowly for 10 years," said Gibbs, whose persistence in forcing the U.S. government to evacuate her contaminated New York neighborhood helped launch the Superfund program.

"You can accelerate all you want, but what does that really mean? That they'll put only 50 lawyers before the shovels instead of 100? The law was always supposed to be shovels first and lawyers second. But it has always been the other way around in the history of the Bush Administration," said Gibbs, who heads Citizens Clearing House for Hazardous Waste in Arlington, Va.

Old or abandoned chemical dump sites on the Superfund list are considered national priorities for cleanup because of the danger they pose to residents and the environment. The multibillion-dollar Superfund is bankrolled by a tax on the nation's industries, and the businesses that created or dumped the waste are held responsible for paying cleanup costs.

But, historically, placement on the list has meant that a site gets entangled in governmental red tape and exhaustive studies. On average, 12 years elapse between the time a dump comes to the EPA's attention and completion of cleanup, the EPA estimates, and the average cost per site has swelled to \$30 million.

At the 20-acre McColl dump in Fullerton—one of the most prolonged cases in the nation—the EPA has spent an estimated \$20 million and 10 years on studies, but has not settled yet on a cleanup a little bit wrong, you'd probably need one additional monitoring well or something like that. It's not going to be so wrong that it is

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